*The Grapes of Wrath*

John Steinbeck

CHARACTERIZATION

The central character in a work of literature is the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak.

The novel begins with Tom Joad’s release from prison. He is a convicted killer who acted in self-defense and has served his debt to society. Soon he joins his family for the trip to California. Many readers consider Tom Joad the protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a man who struggles against violent instincts while standing up for the rights of the dispossessed.

The protagonist’s journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist’s and highlight important features of the main character’s personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Several foils propel Tom into manhood. Reverend Casy speaks a language of pantheism and growing political awareness. Ma is a restraining figure, always reminding Tom of his checkered past and responsibility to the family. Even poor Muley, a solitary outcast on the land, unwittingly warns Tom of the consequences of social exile. These foils vie to lead Tom toward his final choices.

Discussion:

Who is the antagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Is it the men who drive the tractors? Is it the bank officials who own the land? Or is the antagonist not a person at all, but the “monster” hounding the farmers from Oklahoma all the way to California?

Are the protagonist and the antagonist in this novel in a fair fight? Can the Joads win, or are the odds stacked against them?

In-class #4:

literary analysis

Write your own analysis of the questions you discussed with your group. Explore the antagonist(s) of the novel—who the real antagonist is, if the fight is fair, etc.